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‘An act of struggle in the present’: History, education and political campaigning by South Asian anti-imperialist activists in Britain

Anandi Ramamurthy and Kalpana Wilson

“No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.”

— **Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

‘Every new weapon is useless unless one learns to use it. For us, we must make our history into a weapon. We must learn from each defeat.’

Dalair Singh in Tariq Mehmood’s Hand on the Sun.

This chapter will explore the importance that South Asian campaigning organisations in Britain placed on understanding the history of anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggle, in developing their organisations and mobilising supporters. It will explore two distinct case studies. First, it will look at the way Asian Youth Movements in cities such as Bradford, Manchester and Sheffield educated their members and supporters about past and ongoing activism both in the UK and abroad during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second case study will examine the work of the 1857 Committee, established in 2006 to counteract the hegemonic narratives in the UK and India on the 150th anniversary of the 1857 uprising in South Asia. Through these two moments we will reflect on the forms of action that were taken during differing political moments to consider how history has been a) harnessed as a tool through which contemporary campaigns were bolstered and supported; and b) how in moments which appeared quite bleak and in which campaigning work was limited, interrogating and challenging hegemonic histories served as a fulcrum around which progressive South Asian activists rearticulated ideas which challenged religious communal understandings of the past, reaffirmed the value of solidarity between the oppressed and through this process were able to offer a challenge to contemporary imperialist analyses of global events.

The Asian Youth Movements

The Asian Youth Movements were formed in the 1970s amongst children of post-war migrants, the majority of whom had come to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s when there was a shortage of factory labour. While initially many of these communities were made up of single men, by the early 1970s a growing number had begun to bring their families to the UK. It was the children of these migrants, raised in Britain, who began to reach adulthood in the late 1970s and saw their dreams of a better life shattered by their families' experiences of racism on the street, in housing, in the workplace and in school. The increase in racist violence which led to the death of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in 1976 was the catalyst for the youth to organise. While the Indian Workers Association¹ had mobilised Indian workers of the first generation, the youth - many of them from Pakistan and Bangladesh – now felt the imperative to create their own organisations in order to defend themselves against racist violence on the street. In the north of England in particular, the Asian Youth Movements that developed were influenced by socialist and communist groups as well as Marxist-Leninist-led Indian Workers Associations who encouraged them to value their radical pasts. The reflection of the old Indian communist, Dalair Singh in Tariq Mehmood's novel *Hand on the Sun* (1983) expresses the sentiments and beliefs that the Asian Youth Movement (Bradford) held about the value of educating themselves on historical and contemporary struggles for justice. For the AYM of Bradford, Manchester and Sheffield, education was not an instrumental process that would provide them with the skills with which to find employment, but was rather a tool through which they could better understand their world and the power relations in it, so as to challenge racist and imperialist oppression.

For a significant number of AYM members, school was an environment in which they had been constrained from learning, stuck in English as a second language classes (even when they could speak English) or taught a colonial and racist syllabus that presented British

¹ The Indian Workers Association was first established in 1937 in Coventry to support the welfare of Indian migrants in Britain as well as to raise support amongst working class Indians for the Indian independence movement. In the 1960s a number of different IWAs developed in towns and cities such as Birmingham, Southall and Bradford across the UK. They were supported by the Indian communist parties with whom they had close ties.

colonisers as saviours of India (Ramamurthy 2013:17-22; Shukra 1998:46). School was an environment coloured by playground and institutional racism, violence and intimidation. Racism permitted white teachers and pupils to feel they had the right to rename Asian pupils with English names in a social and curriculum environment in which non-western cultures were perceived as inferior and rarely discussed. It permitted racist pupils to bully and intimidate Asian classmates through name calling and physical violence. The violence faced by Asian schoolchildren was exacerbated by being bussed to schools outside of their communities under state policies of dispersal, leaving them even more vulnerable to aggression from both parents and children. Routines of racist violence were well established in Bradford with Friday known as the 'Paki bashing day', causing many kids to miss school on this day.

In such a climate, it was therefore outside of school that they not only mobilised and organised themselves against racism but also developed an independent critical education. The public library, in particular, served as an open space that AYM members in Bradford congregated in. One member who was homeless ended up spending his days in the library reading and educating himself on ideas that he would then share with other members.

'... I had the library to stay in, so I had the advantage over others in that sense. They were grounded in school and stuff... But I'd be in the library as soon as it opened. I'd be there until it closed. ... I just read a lot, I had nothing else to do during the day... didn't have family, didn't have a home, I just read as much as I could. I began to understand that the world I lived in was really fundamentally unfair. I began to understand that this country was rich because we were poor and I also began to understand that we were here because they were there and I really believed that.'

(Mehmood 2006)

The library, for Tariq as a young man without a family life, became a sanctuary and a place of security. As a result, the library became a space to meet and a place where discussions took place. Outside the boundaries of state schooling, the youth were able to access resources to question the colonial histories and ideas they were fed in formal education. The value of this education is highlighted by the efforts they took to go to the library where for them a real education was taking place. As Gurnam recalled:

Sometimes I'd go to the library in the evenings as well as after school. Or actually *slam* (col.) from school, miss classes and end up in the library. Which I mean, I think

back to that, and I think that was something to do with developing a critical education.

...We used to kind of go in the library cafe when it opened in the morning, ... We didn't have much money so we'd all buy a cup of tea ... just to prove that we were *bona fide*. ... we used to share what we were reading and then it would get into disputes about certain politics, and I would say, 'Go and get the book'. And so the library was like our kind of reference. ... I can remember reading *Capital*, Marx's *Capital*, and discussing that and talking about Gramsci and all these other people and becoming politicised. And this was around the age of 16 to 17.' (Singh 2006)

Near the library, the Fourth Idea Bookshop, a left bookshop run by Reuben Goldberg, a member of the International Marxist Group, also provided a space of inspiration from which they would borrow books and read about the histories of colonialism and the organised struggles against it. (Ramamurthy 2013:39)

These memories indicate the importance that the youth placed in educating themselves and the efforts that they made to understand the world and injustice. Education was never divorced from organising but went hand in hand. AYM Bradford, Manchester and later AYM Sheffield all produced magazines to inform their members and supporters about the experience of racism and colonialism. *Kala Tara*, for example, was the first magazine to be produced by an Asian Youth Movement and is described as 'an instrument which could carry our views and feelings' (AYM Bradford 1979). While only one issue of the magazine was ever produced, the paper highlights the attempt by the youth to articulate positions and perspectives on history.

Most importantly the paper represented through its content the core slogan of the AYM: 'Black people have the right, here to stay, here to fight'. In their introduction 'Why a paper', they identified themselves through both the terms *Asian* and *Black*. In adopting the term *black* as a political identity, the AYM, like many other groups rooted in Asian and African Caribbean communities in Britain, referred to a shared struggle against racism as well as histories of imperialist exploitation and resistance to it. The youth showed an historical understanding of the roots of racism within capitalist development that had benefited from the exploitation of racialised bodies and vast areas of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean during both the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent European colonial expansion. They

believed it was therefore important for there to be a 'general unity of the black community' because 'it is our skin that the racists will attack' (AYM Bradford 1979:2). This politics was influenced by the Black Power movement in the US, the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, as well as the national liberation struggles across Asia and Africa. The influence of the Black Panthers can be seen in the AYM's adoption of the black power fist in their logo on the cover of *Kala Tara*. INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Through their magazines, as well as in public meetings and discussions, they recalled the histories of colonial exploitation which left peoples from South Asia and other former colonies with no choice but to migrate to the centre of capital. They contextualised the contemporary experience of racism by exploring the recent history of racist violence in the UK as well as the history of the immigration laws. Through a historical analysis, *Kala Tara* articulated the way both the Labour and the Conservative Party were complicit in the legal strategies employed to exclude black immigration. This analysis was repeated on the street through the slogan 'Labour Tory both the same, both play the racists' game.' While understanding that immigration laws were by their very nature oppressive and operated 'to keep the rich nations rich and the poor ones poor (AYM Bradford, 1979:8)', the AYMs also wished to acknowledge that in Britain the logic of the immigration laws were to keep black people out as much as possible. One prime example of this was the 1972 Immigration Act railroaded through parliament in three days by Labour, in order to stop Ugandan Asians with British passports from migrating to Britain when they were expelled as a result of Uganda's Africanisation policy. For this reason, the AYMs argued that they should always be challenged as racist. This led to the slightly cumbersome slogan: 'End all immigration laws, all immigration laws are racist' (AYM Bradford 1979:10-11). This critical analysis was only possible through an understanding of history.

Finally, *Kala Tara* also shared experiences of resistance resonating with the final part of the core AYM slogan 'here to fight', celebrating the achievements of the AYM as well as expressing solidarity with others struggling against British colonialism such as the Irish Republican movement. Their approach to understanding history encapsulates Paulo Freire's position that the oppressed provide their own examples for their redemption.

Public meetings about particular anti-immigration and anti-colonial struggles also gave members a chance to hear and discuss other resistance struggles and consider their relationship to contemporary activism. The Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign, which

struggled for the right of Anwar to bring her young children to Britain following a Home Office refusal to accept that the children were hers, organised speakers from the Grunwick Strike of 1976, as well as speakers from the Pakistani Workers Association, the Indian Workers Association and the Kashmiri Workers Association to speak at a public rally, in order to put Anwar's struggle in the context of the experience of black migrants in Britain. This effort to contextualise Anwar's single issue campaign not only played a role in educating supporters, but politicised Anwar herself, who became a powerful speaker who would go on to defend others after her own victory. Anwar's growth epitomises the idea of Gramsci's organic intellectual with her historical and political knowledge growing through the process and experience of organising.

Asian Youth Movements in Manchester and Sheffield also produced magazines and held public meetings to explore similar issues to those discussed in *Kala Tara*. The success of the Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign was the impetus for the publication of the first issue of AYM (Manchester)'s journal *Liberation*. (1981). The timing of this publication shows how important critical education was for the organisation. They used the journal to reflect on the successes as well as the problems experienced by the campaign. For example, in an interview for *Liberation*, Anwar notes how many people believe the Granada TV programme that exposed the state's lies 'clinched the victory'. The programme, Anwar reflected, 'helped to quicken the process and reached people we could not have persuaded to support us. But it is important to remember that without a campaign there would be no television programme or MP support.' The paper then went on to reflect on why they had run an individual campaign rather than a broad-based one against the racism of the immigration laws, arguing that to have focussed primarily on the wider issue of the desire by the state to control the numbers of black migrants would not have worked effectively as a tactic to enable Anwar to be reunited with her children. The core issue for Anwar was the right of black people settled here to have their dependants join them without delays and harassment. (AYM Manchester 1981:20-21)

Liberation also reflected on the effectiveness of single issue or broad based campaigns against racism, recognising that 'for every individual who is faced with deportation or deprived of his family it is of course not possible to have a defence campaign, but defence campaigns can be used to create the conditions for a mass campaign against racism and ultimately the state' and above all they argued 'it gives the confidence 'that together we

have the power to win' (AYM Manchester 1981:22). After debating the tactics employed by the campaign, the wider question of increasingly stringent immigration legislation was then discussed with attention given to the struggle against the Nationality Bill (1981), which would remove the right of those born in the UK to citizenship. Other articles provided wider understandings of British racism including an article on the Imperial Typewriters strike of 1974, which challenged British trade union racism; and essays on international struggles such as the racism of Zionism from the early 1900s in an article called 'Black Jews in the Racist state of Israel' (AYM Manchester 1981). The range of topics explored encouraged readers to make connections between the history of colonialism and contemporary British racism to create a pedagogy that was strategic and performative – part of a broader political practice for social change (Giroux 2011: 162).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Sheffield's magazine *Kala Mazdoor*, meaning black worker, also presented a similar balance of analysis of workers' struggles and campaigns against state and street racism (AYM Sheffield 1983). The first issue summarised core concepts from Sivanandan's (1981) recently published essay, 'From resistance to rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean struggles in Britain' that provided a sense of history and context to the movements that emerged after 1981. One member from Birmingham even commented on how they would sell copies of Sivanandan's article at meetings (Bassi 2006). The rest of the magazine gave coverage to campaigns in which AYM Sheffield was involved as well as poetry that resonated with the issues they explored. The second issue of *Kala Mazdoor* made a greater effort to link the struggle against racism in Britain with anti-imperialist struggles in South Africa and Palestine, while also highlighting women's struggles in Pakistan (AYM Sheffield 1985). AYM Sheffield's attempt to critically educate young people associated with the movement can also be seen through a summer school which they organised that included talks on 'why we need an AYM', 'State racism, fascism and the fight back,' 'Linking the struggles: miners, Ireland and black people' and a discussion on 'Should we support independent Khalistan, independent Kashmir'. The weekend also included a walk in the countryside, a social and a film screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (AYM Sheffield 1984). As a whole, their method of using historical lessons to reflect on contemporary struggles encapsulated Marx's dictum –

‘philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it’.
(Marx 1845)

Changing configurations of British racism and challenges to it

The British state’s adoption in the 1980s of multicultural policies which involved equal opportunities legislation, attempts to incorporate black and ethnic minority people into institutional structures, and the establishment of conservative elements within black and ethnic minority communities as spokespersons or community leaders, came in response to the culmination of this wide array of struggles. These included those against racist policing and immigration control, racist attacks on the streets and on people’s homes, and racism in access to employment, education and health. In particular, multiculturalism acted as a strategy to fragment the black politics which had emerged out of these struggles, which brought together all those who experienced institutionalised racism. Multicultural policies actively sought to undermine this solidarity through initiatives (particularly related to the funding of community organisations) which encouraged people to come together on a much narrower basis of country of origin, language and later, with the emergence in the 1990s of the notion of ‘faith communities’, religion (Alexander, 1998).

As the 1980s wore on, even the youth movements ceased to provide the critical education that they had once offered as they became absorbed in state structures that eventually disintegrated their political direction as they became more and more focussed on serving communities through the provision of youth and community centres (Ramamurthy 2013). The impact of State initiatives to challenge deprivation following the Scarman report on the Brixton riots of 1981 influenced a range of movements including the AYMs (Ramamurthy 2013; Shukra 1998). Even where there was an institutional demand for an anti-racist rather than simply a multicultural approach to equal opportunities, as in the case of the Greater London Council (GLC), the argument for liaison with state structures in order to use the resources of the state to fight the state diminished the focus on social change to one that increasingly led to demands for enquiries and ‘sceptical cooperation’ (Shukra 1989:56). This separated an analysis of anti-racism from anti-imperialist struggle. Such developments forced a division between anti-racist and anti-imperialist histories, since the latter inevitably required a critique of the British state that was incompatible with an approach that could expect progressive change from within.

There remained a few small organisations that challenged this development. For example, the South Asia Solidarity Group (SASG), which was established in the late 1980s in London, from the outset sought to educate and build support amongst its supporters for anti-imperialist and left-led people's struggles in the countries of South Asia alongside involvement in the anti-racist struggles of the South Asian communities in Britain.

This was an era when the Cold War came to an end and the dominant imperialist discourse came to be that of a 'clash of civilisations' with 'Islam' identified as the new 'threat' to the West. An early response to this was the formation of the coalition 'Black People Against War in the Gulf' during the 1992 Gulf War, in which SASG participated. At the same time, SASG activists felt that it was essential to gather and share information and ideas coming out of progressive and revolutionary movements in South Asia which were rarely discussed in Britain. As one member explains, 'anti-imperialist solidarity was mainly thought of in terms of solidarity with the struggle in South Africa, and the struggle of the Palestinians, but we rarely heard anything about the struggles going on in our own countries, and how the British government and British companies were still so heavily involved in exploiting them'. One of the group's aims was to 'expose the racism and deliberate mystification in dominant British analysis of South Asian issues' (Inqilab, 1990). This approach was applied to both contemporary developments and, as in the case of the 1857 commemorations, to historical events.

Remembering 1857

The value of history in understanding contemporary struggles was seen particularly clearly in the 2007 commemorations by the 1857 Committee to mark the 150th anniversary of the 1857 uprising. Initiated by the SASG and Birmingham's South Asian Alliance, the committee also included independent black activists who had worked in the Asian Youth Movements and the Pakistani Workers' Association ² during the 1970s and 1980s. In recalling the joint

² A Pakistani Workers Association was established in Manchester and Birmingham in the mid 1980s in order to mobilise the Pakistani community in anti-racist struggles as well as to develop support and solidarity for progressive movements in Pakistan.

struggle of Hindus and Muslims against the East India Company, and drawing parallels with contemporary global conflicts, the alternative commemoration sought to highlight ongoing struggles against imperialism and to challenge the increasing influence of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis and the rise of Islamophobia in Britain which had created a view of South Asian communities as both defined and divided by religion and culture.

From the late 1990s onwards, the British state turned away from multiculturalism as a strategy in favour of a new assertion of 'Britishness' in the context of its domestic and global 'war on terror' (Kundnani, 2007; Wilson, 2007) and the emergence of 'new hierarchies of belonging' (Back and Sinha, 2011). While ethnic minorities continued to be represented as a part of the face of postcolonial Britain, this belonging now became conditional on identification with 'British values' and more concretely with the strategic economic and geo-political objectives of the British state. Alongside and inextricable from these changes in state policy was the reconfiguration of racism in Britain. While earlier racialised constructions and their material effects remained extremely powerful, anti-Muslim racism, which emerged as a key theme in the early 1990s, now moved centre-stage. In challenging the hegemonic narrative of 1857, the committee challenged the scapegoating of Muslims and highlighted the possibility of unity between the oppressed:

In 1857 Baba Ram Charan Das (who was a Hindu) and Amir Ali (a Muslim), both leaders of the Uprising, were hanged from the same tree in Faizabad (U.P.) by the British. In the years that followed this tree became a shrine for both Muslims and Hindus to remember and celebrate their resistance. Fearful of this unity, the British administration had the tree cut down... (from a panel of the exhibition 'The Uprisings of 1857' produced by South Asia Solidarity Group and the 1857 Committee)

1857 saw sustained and widespread uprisings against British rule which spread across much of the northern half of what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and lasted almost two years. As in other regions which experienced colonial rule, South Asia saw almost continuous resistance in multiple forms. There were at least 77 separate officially recorded instances of peasant uprisings during British colonialism, and this does not reflect the extent of more 'day-to-day' forms of resistance to colonial rule. But the 1857 uprisings were unprecedented in their scale and social diversity. At their centre was a massive mutiny by

Indian soldiers (known as *sipahis* or *sepoys*) in the British East India Company's army: of 139,000 *sepoys* in the Bengal Army, all but 7, 796 rebelled. But the uprisings were also marked by the breadth of popular participation which 'simultaneously drew together and cut through multiple religious, caste, and regional identities' (Krishna, 2006). Most notably, perhaps, resistance to imperial rule was waged in the name of a single nation 'Hindustan' (India) and two religions: Islam and Hinduism. As Ray (2003) notes, rebel proclamations were issued addressed to 'the Hindus and Muslims of Hindustan'³, and where the British had been defeated it was announced that 'the two religions govern' (357-9). Perceiving this unity as the most powerful potential threat to British imperialism, and concluding that '*divide et impera* should be the principle of [British] Indian government' (Lieutenant Colonel John Coke, Commandant of Moradabad, cited in Palme Dutt, 1947:456), even before the uprisings had been completely suppressed, the British rulers started to attempt to reconstruct them as an exclusively Muslim affair. Soon, British historians began in earnest the project of reconstructing Indian history as one of oppression of Hindus by alien Muslim rulers (Krishna, 2006).

The commemoration of these events in South Asia and in Britain reflected the multiplicity of readings of these events and the meanings attributed to them by different social forces and actors, and the contemporary reconfigurations of 'race' in the context of the current period of neoliberal imperialism.

For the Indian state, the commemoration was notably muted. In contrast to the triumphalist rhetoric accompanying economic liberalisation which marked the first decade of the 21st century, the neoliberal state's approach to what official Indian historiography had come to term the 'First war of independence' was perhaps inevitably ambivalent rather than celebratory. This reflected the deep contradictions at the heart of India's model of economic

³ For example: '[Mirza Feroz Shah Shahzada]: To all Hindoos and Mahommedans of Hindoostan who are faithful to their religion, know that sovereignty is one of God's chief boons, one which a deceitful tyrant is never allowed to retain. For several years the English have been committing all kinds of excesses and tyrannies being desirous of converting all men to Christianity by force, and subverting and doing away with the religion of Hindoos and Mahommedans. When God saw this fact, He so altered the hearts of the inhabitants of Hindoostan that they have been doing their best to get rid of the English themselves'. (cited in Ray, 2003:385)

growth which involved not only rapidly growing inequality and the marginalisation of significant sections of the population, but untrammelled and destructive incursions by Indian and foreign-owned global corporates uncomfortably reminiscent of the actions of the East India Company, the 'world's first multinational corporation' (Robins, 2006) which represented British interests in 1857. 2007 itself witnessed continuing struggles against the establishment of Special Economic Zones, under the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894⁴, where state laws were suspended and corporations could appoint administrators. The months leading up to the anniversary in May that year saw killings by police and paramilitaries of people resisting state-sponsored corporate acquisition of their land in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal and Kalinganagar in Orissa, while similar movements against displacement and corporate takeover of land continued in many other parts of the country.

Meanwhile the Indian state was deeply implicated in contemporary imperialist projects, as a key US ally in the 'War on Terror' into which it had integrated its own long running war on the people of Kashmir and its ongoing conflict with Pakistan, which further complicated its commemoration of the anti-imperialist resistance of 1857. In fact, only two years earlier Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had affirmed his contribution to the 'rehabilitation' of colonialism associated with the post-Cold War era with a speech at Oxford University in which he hailed the 'beneficial consequences' of British colonial rule, including 'Our notions of the rule of law, of a Constitutional government, of a free press, of a professional civil service, of modern universities and research laboratoriesOur judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy and our police', (Singh, 2005) echoing the sentiments of Gordon Brown (then Chancellor in the British Government) who had chosen a visit to Tanzania to wax eloquent in praise of British colonialism and its promotion of 'British values' (Daily Mail, 2005). Further, the previous decade had seen the entrenchment within the institutions of the Indian state of Hindu supremacist notions of citizenship (notions which are quite consistent with neoliberal imperialism [Wilson 2015]) and the Hindu supremacist project of

⁴ This Act was subsequently repealed, but its replacement, the Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill was criticised for actually legalising and intensifying 'ongoing corporate land-grab' even while using terms such as 'informed consent', and 'partnership in development'. (Liberation, 2011)

rewriting India's history as one determined by Hindu-Muslim conflict, a version which is fatally undermined by a focus on 1857.

British official references to the anniversary were also subdued and ambivalent, requiring as they did that events marked inescapably by insurgent and counter-insurgent violence should be described in the language in which the entire colonial encounter between Britain and India is now officially cast – as part of a long running and mutually beneficial 'close relationship'. The burst of popular histories by British writers which the anniversary produced was more revealing. These included several reworkings of colonial historiography in which the beleaguered British were once again the heroic subjects (see for example Saul David's 'The Indian Mutiny' [2003]). Arguably the book which had the greatest impact, however, was William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal* (Dalrymple, 2006) which dealt with the siege of Delhi in 1857, and promised to present for the first time 'an Indian perspective' on the siege. Instead, in a clear attempt to evoke parallels with the dominant US and British representation of the present, it portrayed the uprisings primarily as a 'war of religion' between Islam and Christianity, ignoring the work of Indian historians which has convincingly demonstrated how people sharing a syncretic culture, but identifying with different religions (Hinduism and Islam) consciously united to fight the colonisers in 1857 (Wilson, 2012).

The 1857 Committee

This was the background against which left-oriented anti-imperialist South Asian organisations based in Britain, such as the SASG and the Birmingham-based South Asian Alliance, came together as the 1857 Committee. For those in South Asia and Britain who were engaged in multiple ongoing movements against imperialism, war, racism and the religious right, the anniversary was an opportunity to highlight parallels between 1857 and the contemporary conjuncture, and to celebrate and reaffirm the anti-imperialist and supra-communal character of the uprisings. As the committee outlined:

'Today an American empire is trying to extend its global supremacy over a region from Asia to Africa and Latin America and in the process is being pushed into fighting for its survival. Similarly, according to Marx, at the time of the 1857 rebellion, Britain, using South Asia as its base, was trying to establish its imperial supremacy over Asia,

including China in the North, Iran and Afghanistan in the West. However, the resistance to its supremacy forced England into fighting for its survival as a colonial power in **South Asia**'. (1857 Committee, 2007)

In London, for example, the 1857 Committee and the SASG held a conference entitled '1857/2007: Imperialism, 'Race', Resistance' in which the participants focussed as much on the urgency of contemporary struggles as on those of 1857. The speakers included among others, revolutionary left and feminist activist Kavita Krishnan of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), lawyer and veteran campaigner on human rights violations in Kashmir and the Northeast of India Nandita Haksar, and Pakistani scholar of nationalism and the state, Rubina Saigol. In Birmingham, a similar event took place with speakers including Marxist scholars such as Dr Ram Puniyani and Professor John Newsinger who commented on Marx's writing about the 1857 uprising, along with representatives of the Kashmiri Workers Association, SASG and Iraqi Democrats Against Occupation. In Manchester, speakers included author Nick Robins who spoke about the history of the East India Company as the first multinational, Ayesha Siddiqi on the relationship between militarisation and corporatisation of the Pakistani state, as well as giving a platform to the revolutionary poem *Kaal Bolaindi* that has been sung in Punjab since the resistances of that time. In all three places, the links between past and present experiences were drawn out. As Naeem Malik outlined in his talk at the Manchester conference:

'Some of us originating from the sub-continent who have been involved in struggles against racism, colonialism and imperialism were prompted by the current events like the Iraq war and the occupation of Afghanistan to come together to look at the significance of 1857... We have already heard that 1857 was a result of the similar processes that we see developing today, globalisation, multinationals and their impact and the West's thirst for resources. Then it was the East India Company. Today it is Halliburton and its likes. Then it was cotton - the driving force for industrialisation. Today oil is the necessary ingredient to keep the economy moving.'

Among the materials circulated was an essay by Pranay Krishna exploring 'Who's afraid of 1857' and noting how '[o]n the eve of the 150th Anniversary of 1857 and the Birth Centenary of Bhagat Singh, we are witness to the Central Industries Minister declaring that he would "ideally" like to see the whole of India turned into an SEZ (Special Economic Zone); to the swelling ranks of farmers' suicides and starvation deaths; to snatching away of land

from tribals and peasants to hand over to corporate capital; to an unprecedented degree of 'strategic' subservience towards the US; towards a US shadow over everything from agrarian policy to security secrets to military plans' (Krishna, 2006). Such analyses drew out the value of the past for understanding both present imperialist wars and occupations globally as well as the neo-liberal practices of the current Indian government.

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A central and lasting outcome of these commemorations was the collaborative production of an exhibition which used texts, photographs, paintings, cartoons, newspaper clippings and original artwork to highlight three main themes of continuity between 1857 and the moment in which we found ourselves in 2007. Firstly, the notion of 'company rule' which arguably had come full circle from the East India Company's dominion up until 1857, to the growing power of transnational corporations (including Indian companies) to bypass and control the state in South Asia, the implications of which were made viscerally real that year by events such as those of Nandigram and Kalinganagar. Secondly, the Islamophobia of the War on Terror and its construction of demonised Muslim 'others' which found strong echoes in the British response to 1857 and the array of racialized representations of the 'barbarism' of the rebels. And finally, the Hindu-Muslim unity of the uprisings which was invoked in the present in a direct challenge to the increasingly powerful forces of the Hindu right, a modern political force which itself was deeply rooted in colonial constructions of age old Hindu-Muslim enmity which formed a central part of the British divide and rule strategy after 1857.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

The organisation of the exhibition and the surrounding events acted as a campaign to challenge revisionist approaches to history. South Asian activists and other progressive intellectuals with an interest in India published blogs and ideas to try to develop a critical appraisal of this past for our collective futures. Such posts asserted commonalities of struggle between now and then. The exhibition continues to be displayed at events in Birmingham and London in order to maintain a progressive understanding of our pasts for our collective futures.

CONCLUSION

In each of the periods discussed here, South Asian activists have drawn on anti-imperialist and anti-racist histories in order to understand the present and mobilise support for progressive ideas with which to try to transform the future. The Asian Youth Movements in their slogans, magazines and public meetings reflected an historical understanding of the present. The adoption of political blackness, the critique of both the Labour and Tory collusion in immigration legislation as well as the wider attempts to educate themselves and their supporters in anti-colonial histories created space for the development of organic intellectuals whose understanding of history was mobilised for ongoing campaigns. In 2007, in a very different era both globally and in Britain, where many progressive organisations had collapsed or been co-opted, anti-imperialist activists mobilised to challenge hegemonic knowledge about a key political moment in subcontinental history. Commemoration of the solidarities between Hindus and Muslims in a historic struggle against British imperialism was an important way of challenging contemporary Hindu supremacist forces in India. These forces are aligned with Western governments and global capital in their attack on Muslims and their promotion of neo-liberal imperialism.

In Britain today we can continue to learn lessons from the approaches to history and resistance that these two examples lend us. The need to build unity and solidarity between those who have fought against racism and colonialism remains, although the political potential of collectively organising as *black* is less widely accepted than it was in the 1980s and 1990s. The concept of an anti-imperialist political blackness that the AYMs supported found resonance in the NUS in 2016.⁵ Malia Bouattia as NUS Black Student's officer revived this history amongst students during Black History Month arguing: 'With many Black communities in Britain formed of recent migrants, and against the backdrop of widespread anti-colonial movements in the Global South, there was also a strong, vocal support for movements for the liberation of Black people worldwide, from what for many was the heartland of empire: 'Great Britain'. (Bouattia 2016) For Malia Bouattia, later president of the NUS 2016-2017, this history offered a framework in which the wider experiences of

⁵ Since the 1990s, trade unions have been the only organisations that have maintained the concept of 'Black sections' as one that includes all non-white members that have experienced racism.

Islamophobia and racism in the UK could be understood as part of an international struggle, including that against Zionist oppression.

In the context of ongoing contestations over the usefulness of political blackness as a concept, Black feminist gender violence activist Marai Larasi reflects

‘...today’s debates must be understood in the context of phenomena such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the tragedy, frustration and exhaustion that led to the emergence of such a movement. There is a raw, tangible Black pain that is being felt from London to São Paulo to Texas; and there is a specificity to the pain felt by those of us who are descendants of millions of enslaved African people. This pain cannot continue to be ignored and we refuse to be silenced. We refuse to be pushed aside.

Why would I then choose to use Black politically? Surely that risks having our specific struggles made invisible, or side-lined..? There is certainly that risk. Yes. However, I choose to use political BLACKness, as Gilroy (2002) states, “as a phenomenon of assertive decolonization”...however committed I am to my own liberation, I see my struggle as bound up with that of others....the people of Standing Rock, and with Māori activists demanding ‘Hands Off Our Tamariki’⁶, and with Apna Haq⁷ in Rotherham fighting for the right to stay open, and with African-American activists chanting ‘Say Her Name’. My liberation is connected to the liberation of all colonised peoples. For me, political BLACKness is not a solution, it is a position we can take that affords us a space of reflection, unity and resistance. As we say in Jamaica ‘Iron Sharpen Iron’. (2016)

As this suggests, it is important to remember that the notion of political blackness which emerged from the history of anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles in Britain has always been primarily understood collectively, as a political strategy for solidarity between diverse but intimately related struggles rather than as an attempt to homogenise identity and

⁶ Struggle related to the New Zealand state’s removal of Māori children and their placement in non- Māori families

⁷ Asian women’s organization supporting women and children experiencing domestic violence

experience. Whatever the terms we finally use to define ourselves and our relationship with others, the articulation and repetition of the histories of resistance and revolutionary struggles remains crucial. As Stella Dadzie, co-founder OWAAD (Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent) argues: "A lot of stories were lost, so I think it is really important that stories are told and told again so that they do become part of our sense of historical self." (Ruiz 2009)

For those who commemorated the centenary of the 1857 uprisings as a syncretic anti-imperialist people's struggle, the battle over South Asian history has become even more intense since the coming to power in 2014 of a Hindu supremacist, far-right pro-corporate central government in India under Narendra Modi. Since then, India has seen a huge increase in state-sponsored and state-condoned violence against minorities, particularly Muslims, and against Dalits, as well as growing repression against all forms of dissent, with those who protest labelled 'anti-national' (Krishnan, 2015, Couderé, 2016, Cheema, 2017). Alongside this, the Sangh Parivar (the network of political parties, mass organisations, paramilitaries and vigilante groups which make up the Hindu right, including the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party) is engaged in a project of rewriting history which involves both representing Hindu mythology as genuine ancient history, and recasting more recent Indian history once again as one of perennial Hindu-Muslim conflict, even seeking to rename any landmarks whose names invoke India's long syncretic history (see, for example, Daniyal, 2016 on the move to rename Akbar Road in Delhi). Meanwhile, there is an attempt to appropriate the legacy of leaders of the most oppressed groups (like eminent Indian jurist and politician, Dalit leader BR Ambedkar, who wrote India's Constitution), while obliterating the history of Dalit and Adivasi struggles against the dominant castes, and demonising the historical and ongoing struggles of the poor and dispossessed against powerful landowners and corporate capital.

Modi's coming to power has also strengthened organisations of the Hindu right in the diaspora, which have played a key role in financially supporting the rise of Hindu supremacism in India. Progressive South Asian organisations have been organising to expose and combat the activities of the Hindu right in Britain since the early 2000s. At the time of writing, SASG and Dalit organisations in Britain are coming together to counter Hindu

supremacist groups which (with the tacit support of the Conservative government) are opposing the implementation of legislation which would outlaw discrimination on the basis of caste, which is widespread among South Asian communities in Britain. Once again, this involves a struggle over history, in this case against a narrative which seeks to deny the history of caste as an exploitative and oppressive hierarchy and of sustained resistance by Dalits and other oppressed castes, and substitute it with a myth of Hindu unity against Muslim 'invaders'.

As we reach the 70th anniversary of formal independence in South Asia and the colonially engineered Partitions of Punjab, Bengal and Kashmir, as a recent editorial by a revolutionary left party in India, the CPI(ML) reminds its readers, more than ever 'remembering history is also an act of struggle in the present – a struggle of memory against oblivion, a struggle against misinterpretation and misappropriation by the rulers, a struggle to learn from history and use it to serve the present needs of the people' (ML Update, 2017).

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Illustrations

Figure 1 Cover of Kala Tara, Asian Youth Movement Bradford 1979

Figure 2 Calendar produced by Birmingham Asian Youth Movement drawing a parallel between the resistance to racism shown by young South Asians in the 1970s and 1980s and the resistance to British colonial rule by Udham Singh, executed by the British after avenging the death of a thousand civilians by killing General Dwyer in London in 1940.

Figure 3 'Peasant resistance', Panel from the 1857 exhibition, making connections between peasant resistance against colonialism in 1857 and the resistance of the rural poor against corporate landgrab today.

Figure 4 'British responses to 1857 (2)', Panel from 1857 exhibition highlighting the policies of divide and rule and racist dehumanisation from 1857 and today.